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Winning and Short-listed Entries From the 2007 Feminist and Women's Studies Association Annual Student Essay Competition

By Yvette Taylor¹ and Melanie Waters²

This special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* showcases the winning and short-listed entries from the 2007 Feminist and Women's Studies Association (FWSA) annual student essay competition. A cornerstone of academic feminism in the UK and Ireland since its inception in 1987, the FWSA is dedicated to the development of feminist research and pedagogy across the disciplines. As feminism broadens and diversifies in response to changing social, political, and cultural circumstances, the FWSA remains committed to the task of developing new points of contact between scholars; as an organisation, it sponsors a biennial international conference, a postgraduate seminar series, and has recently launched a book prize to recognise scholarship that innovative, interdisciplinary and grounded in feminist theory and practice.

Since its launch in 2002 the annual student essay competition has attracted a growing number of entrants each year; in collaboration with JIWS it has come to play an increasingly key role in recognising and promoting academic excellence in the field. Open to candidates at all British and Irish universities, the essay competition seeks to encourage and support original, interdisciplinary work by an emerging generation of feminist scholars. This special issue, then, provides a unique forum for new feminist voices, and works to illuminate the vibrant landscape of feminist scholarship in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The essays printed here are genuinely reflective of the high quality of the submissions to the competition, and of the exciting undergraduate and postgraduate work that is currently being produced under the rubric of feminist and women's studies.

The Essays

From Renaissance devotional writing to U.S. foreign policy, the essays featured in this special issue engage with feminist debates across a range of disciplines, cultures, and historical periods. They are, however, striated by a series of persistent concerns about feminism, its representation, and its potential limitations. In particular, these essays raise pertinent questions about the changing role(s) of feminism: How has it come to form and inform the world around us? How does it influence the ways in which that world is interpreted? To what extent is it implicated in attempts to conceptualise the dynamic interactions of gender and power? In addition, the essays here explore the myriad possibilities presented by feminism, highlighting its compelling diversity in the early years of the twenty-first century.

In the winning entry, 'Fighting for Subjectivity: Articulations of Physicality in *Girlfight*', Katharina Lindner analyses Karyn Kusama's acclaimed boxing film, first released in 2000, through the lens of recent critical discourses relating to feminism, gender, and genre. With detailed reference to the film's compelling boxing sequences, Lindner telegraphs the provocative ways in which Kusama's representation of the active

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female body works to challenge heteronormative approaches to gender, embodiment, and subjectivity. More pressingly, however, she shows how the film's sustained implication of the body in the protagonist's search for a subjective identity is, ultimately, subverted by its conservative denouement, in which the materiality of the body is intriguingly effaced.

In 'Speaking of 'Respect for Women': Gender and Politics in U.S. Foreign Policy Discourse' Alletta Brenner examines how the language of 'women's rights' entered into foreign policy discourses during the Bush administration. Taking account of speeches, press releases, interviews, and written documents, Brenner claims that feminist-inspired language and concepts came to be introduced into mainstream discourses in the service of other foreign policy objectives. Yet, while Brenner acknowledges the political motivations behind this strategic appropriation, she also identifies how the use of such language might present a discursive opening through which more substantive change may be achieved.

By contrast, Katherine Harrison excavates the legacy of Valerie Solanos's *SCUM Manifesto* in a contemporary Swedish context. First translated into Swedish in 2003, the *SCUM Manifesto* is identified as having 'disruptive effects' on Swedish society, impacting significantly upon its (self) perception as a 'gender equal' country. Harrison questions why this text – forty years after its initial publication – should continue to provoke such extreme reactions in a Swedish readership. In doing so, she analyses the ways in which it works to illuminate divergent responses to, and conceptualisations of, gender inequality. Contrasting liberal and radical accounts of Solanos's manifesto, moreover, Harrison asserts the ongoing place and importance of *SCUM*, and usefully foregrounds the contradictions it implies and exposes.

Laura Wainwright is equally concerned with issues of contradiction in her essay, in which she examines the ambiguous role of the comic woman in the early fiction of the modernist writer Jean Rhys. Drawing on scholarship by Hélène Cixous, Donna Haraway, and Shari Benstock, Wainwright traces the various ways in which Rhys's fiction works to expose the vexed positioning of women as objects, rather than subjects, of comedy. Through a detailed analysis of two key texts – *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* and *Good Morning, Midnight* – Wainwright argues that Rhys's experimental deconstruction of comedy constitutes a distinctive attempt to destabilise patriarchal accounts of the relationship between gender and humour.

In "'A Christal Glasse for Christian Women': Meditations on Christ's Passion in the Devotional Literature of Renaissance Women', Frances James sheds a new critical light on the problematic relationship between authorship and authority in women's devotional writing in the Renaissance period. Placing a particular focus on texts by Katherine Parr, Elizabeth Tudor, and Aemilia Lanyer, James considers the pressures upon literate women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and highlights the extent to which the perceived legitimacy of women's writing hinged on its claim to divine (and thus patriarchal) authorisation. More explicitly, though, James shows how literary representations of Christ's Passion by the likes of Parr, Tudor, and Lanyer focus the gaze of female readers on the suffering body of Christ in ways that are, potentially, empowering to women. For James, then, Christ's body comes to function as the eponymous 'christal glasse', through which women writers can begin to envision and articulate their own subjective identities.

In the final essay included here Katy Pilcher explores the gendered and sexualised power relations of female and male strip clubs. Pilcher negotiates the dichotomy between victimhood and agency – in which workers are positioned either as passive and exploited, or as liberated and subversive – through her description of a ‘mutually exploitative’ relations. Basing her intervention on empirical studies which cast light upon the complex ways in which specific venues, acts, and bodies impact upon the dynamic interactions which take place in the space of the strip club, Pilcher concludes that such ‘complexities’ frequently work to consolidate, rather than challenge, heteronormative sexual scripts.

For more information on the FWSA, and the student essay competition in particular, please go to the FWSA website at www.fwsa.org.uk.